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ABSTRACT

The challenge of providing appropriate education to learning-disabled students in the least restrictive environment led to creation of the Content Mastery Program. The program enables learning-disabled students to receive all major instruction in mainstream classrooms, through the cooperative effort of the classroom teacher and the special education teacher, referred to as a content mastery teacher. The program encourages student self-reliance and self-direction as students begin to take charge of their own learning. The content mastery teacher provides tutoring, drill, and alternative teaching methods for students on an "as needed" basis. Services provided by the Content Mastery Center include modified materials, study groups, monitoring student progress, and test-taking skills, study skills. The content mastery teacher plans with the regular classroom teacher to assure common learning goals, objectives, and content for each child. Supervision and training for the Content Mastery Program are provided by a special education support staff coordinator who offers guidance to both content mastery and classroom teachers. (JDD)

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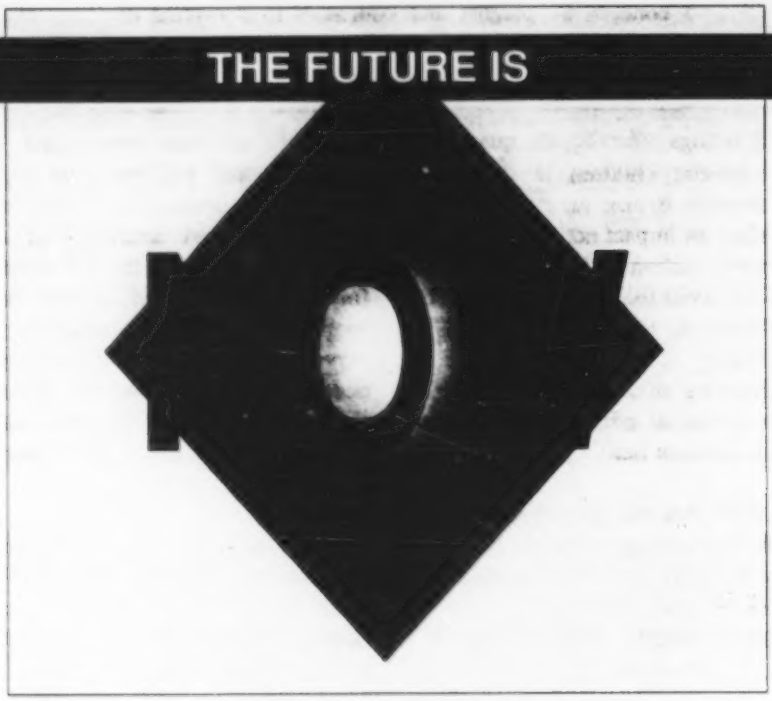

THE CONTENT MASTERY PROGRAM

CARROLLTON-FARMERS BRANCH INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

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REACH

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The challenge of providing for the needs of learning disabled students has grown from expressions of concern by parents and educators to a myriad of judicial and legislative requirements for improvement.

Among the first rulings affecting the quality of education for American children is the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. the Board of Education* which had an impact not only on racial segregation in public schools, but also led to significant questions about the rights and needs of handicapped children. At that time, the standard method of educating students identified as handicapped or learning disabled was to isolate those students in a special education classroom with teachers trained in that field.

While it would seem that this type of specialized instruction would be advantageous to the learners, in the majority of cases, it was not. The children often felt ostracized and "different". Being "special" often meant simply being shut out by children who are quick to deride those who do not fit in. In spite of lower teacher-student ratios and special teaching techniques, students seemed to fall farther and farther behind on the regular curriculum. In these special education classrooms, the students' problems and needs were often more different from their classmates than from students in the regular classroom. Rather than equalizing, this method of teaching students with special needs seemed to create much greater differences—educationally, emotionally, and socially.

Parents responded to the sense of isolation and humiliation their children experienced as a result of being in an isolated learning setting by demanding more and more inclusion in normal classroom activities. This desire to "mainstream" all children continues to drive educators to explore different approaches to helping students with special needs.

One such attempt was to create what became known as a "resource center"—a separate instructional setting for children with special needs, but one in which students would come for skill deficit instruction only. Through this approach, students spent time in the regular classroom and left the class for language and mathematics instruction in the resource center. But this hybrid approach of using resource centers, while offering an improvement over former self-contained special education classrooms, still failed to address many problems experienced in educating learners with special needs and created some new problems. Students still had a sense of isolation since the special education instructional part of their day was away from the regular classroom.

Often, there was no coordination or consistency between the resource room and the classroom, each having their own rules, approaches, and educational objectives. Classroom teachers had no additional training to handle students with special learning needs who were now placed in their classrooms. Assessment of learning was a problem in and of itself for these students who often knew more than they could show by normal methods of content testing. The demand to provide adequate instruction and learning strategies for students became a problem not only because of other demands placed upon the teacher, but because teachers did not know how to address those needs. While in special instruction, students often missed important classroom instruction. Although assistance was provided in language and mathematics, these students needed help in other curriculum areas as well.

The Carrollton-Farmers Branch school district has faced the challenges of (1) mainstreaming learning disabled students, (2) accurately testing learners, and (3) coordinating teaching practices in educating those students with special needs, and (4) effectively supporting the classroom teacher in educating learning disabled students. The Content Mastery Program, as it has been designed and developed in the Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD, attempts to effectively meet these challenges inherent in educating special learners.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The Content Mastery Program of Carrollton-Farmers Branch offers an exciting advancement in the education of learning disabled students by keeping them in the mainstream classroom for all major instruction. Through fuller participation in normal student life, these special students develop greater self-esteem and an increased sense of emotional and social well-being.

Through the cooperative effort of the classroom teacher and the special education teacher, the student has a set of learning objectives which can be met while keeping the child on grade level. Needed support is provided by tutoring and instructional strategies in a Content Mastery Center (CMC). One of the most beneficial aspects of the program, is the encouragement for student self-reliance and self-direction that it provides. Content Mastery students learn to take charge of their own learning.

Through Content Mastery (CM), individual learner needs are met; the child has maximum education in the regular classroom environment; and the learning goals and content of classroom and resource center are coordinated. The goal of this program is to help students learn effectively in the educational mainstream setting.

Content Mastery avoids many problems resulting from other approaches to special education. Students feel less isolated from their peers; they are better able to keep up on grade level; they learn to take responsibility for their own learning; and they learn. For the student, the results of this approach is an increased ability to succeed in school and greater self-esteem.

Students who consistently make low grades are encouraged to use the CMC on a regular basis. Students who have difficulty during the mastery instructional cycle may also benefit from work in the CMC. The instructional cycle provides two critical checkpoints for identifying poor performance—(1) a check for understanding and (2) guided practice. A student who has difficulty at either of these points can receive additional instruction (reteach) in the Content Mastery Center. Also, students who lack vital prerequisite skills for a lesson may receive preparation (pre-teach) for a given lesson from the CM teacher.

A key to the effectiveness of this Content Mastery approach is the degree to which students develop responsibility for their own remediation. Students are expected to assess their on-going classroom learning needs, to recognize when they are not understanding or able to do the task set before them, and to seek help when it is needed. In this way, students take a more active role in structuring their learning environment and acknowledge the active part they must take in their own learning.

The classroom teacher may also make referrals to the Content Mastery Center, but this is generally with the student's agreement. Because full participation in the regular classroom is encouraged, students may not leave the classroom during direct teacher instruction, class discussion, group work, lab, or a film. The level of responsibility that students develop through the CM program contributes to their self-esteem and to their continued learning.

Supervision and training for the Content Mastery Program is provided by a special education support staff coordinator who offers guidance to both CM and classroom teachers. The coordinator is responsible for working with CM teachers to (1) provide systematic ways of tracking and monitoring student progress, (2)ensure appropriate use of the centers, and (3)involve CM teachers in on-going inservice to improve services.

Through the collaborative efforts of the classroom teacher and the Content Mastery teacher, through common learning goals, and through an approach that is pro-active and aggressive in meeting student learning needs, the Content Mastery Program is successful in accomplishing its goal of helping students to achieve their maximum potential in the mainstream classroom.

The Benefits

For mainstream teachers:

- support for the teaching of learning disabled students
- collaborative relationship with Content Mastery teacher
- provision of additional and effective teaching strategies and modified materials
- enhancement of student self-direction and acceptance of responsibility for learning
- tutorial assistance for eligible students
- presence of all students for instruction on all content areas
- creation of alternate methods of assessing learning

For the district:

- efficient use of resources
- support for teachers of learning disabled students
- improved performance by learning disabled students
- collaborative teaching effort between mainstream classroom and Content Mastery teacher
- one set of learning goals and objectives for students with special needs
- maintenance of student performance on grade level

For the students:

- improved learning through effective tutorial strategies
- maximum time in regular classroom
- increased self-direction and responsibility for learning
- improved self-esteem
- greater opportunities for satisfactory socialization and contact with peers
- ability to perform and remain on or near grade level
- demonstration of learning through broader methods of assessment
- one set of learning goals and objectives in all areas of schooling
- tutoring and learning support as needed
- avoids stigma of being in "special education"
- opportunity to learn organizational skills

This document describes the Content Mastery Program. This program has been selected by the Texas Education Agency as one of six exemplary educational programs. Like all of the programs in this series, the Content Mastery Program addresses a basic educational need in an innovative and effective way.

THE CONTENT MASTERY PROGRAM

The Vision

The vision of the Content Mastery Program of Carrollton-Farmers Branch goes back a long way—to the earliest beginnings of education in America. The vision for free public education as espoused by Horace Mann (1796-1859) was one of an educational system for all citizens. Mann argued that free public education would create an industrious, publicly responsible citizenry, and would be a sound investment in the future of the country. The idea of free public education caught hold, in part, because of its additional promise to serve as "the great social equalizer" and to be a means of making this nation a land of opportunity for all people.

Like many of our country's visions for its citizens, the ideal of equal and equalizing education was not realized instantly. Instead, that vision has evolved and developed as our nation matured. One step that seems to have brought the idea of equal education for children closer to reality is the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) passed by Congress in 1975. This law requires that students identified as handicapped not only have their education provided without charge, but that they be educated in the "least restrictive environment" necessary for their learning and development. Carrollton-Farmers Branch has developed an approach to the education of learning disabled children that strives to carry out the role of education as "equalizer."

Content Mastery provides for the effective teaching of learning disabled students in the regular classroom. With the help of special education "resource" or content mastery teachers, students are provided tutoring, drill, and alternative teaching methods on an "as needed" basis, supporting learning of the content being presented in their normal classroom. The special education teachers plan with the regular classroom teacher, assuring common learning goals, objectives, and content for each child. Through Content Mastery, student self-reliance is encouraged so that the student recognizes and is responsible for his or her own learning needs. With less time away from class, students not only are better able to keep up with their peers in learning, they feel more a part of the class, and they feel better about themselves.

In Carrollton-Farmer's Branch ISD, the vision of equal, quality education for all American children is becoming a reality as one group of students moves closer to that dream through the Content Mastery program.

Content Mastery Services Include:

- Hi-lighted materials (textbooks, worksheets, etc.)
- Reading test to students and /or assisting teachers with test adaptation
- Help with a packet, worksheet, written assignment, or anything involving textbooks
- Study groups for exams (also before and after school)
- Discussing individual student's strengths and weaknesses with regular teachers
- Monitoring student progress and placement
- Aiding in student organizational skills
- Vocabulary files for mainstreamed courses
- Supplementary materials for courses, such as laminated science and social studies materials, maps, etc.
- Modified materials
- Test taking skills
- Strategies which develop "study skills independence"
- Problem-solving between regular and special education teachers
- Developing student responsibility and good study skills

REACH

Vol. II, Part 5

Exemplary Program Practices Series

The Content Mastery Program is one of six programs highlighted in REACH, Vol. II, Parts 1-6. A training package for each of the six identified programs has been developed and can be requested through the Educational Service Centers. Training package includes: brochure, videotapes, videoguides, workshop outlines, fact sheets, and implementation guides on each of the six practices.

This REACH document is a publication of the Texas Education Agency, Division of Exemplary Programs. The Division's objective is to identify and disseminate information on exemplary and/or innovative school practices throughout Texas. The production and dissemination of this REACH document and associated training materials were conducted by NuStats, Inc. of Austin under the Exemplary Program Practices series contract to TEA. For additional copies of REACH Vol. II, Parts 1-6, please contact Publications Distribution, Texas Education Agency, 1701 N. Congress Ave., Austin, Texas, 78701-1494 in writing. The cost is $1.00 per copy.